DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 126 404 CG 010 693

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TITLE Communication Channel Selection for Reaching Older Persons.
PUB DATE Oct 75
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society, (28th Louisville, Kentucky, October 26-30, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communications; Educational Background; *Information Seeking; *Mass Media; Media Research; *Media Selection; *Networks; *Older Adults; Senior Citizens; *Surveys

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COMMUNICATION CHANNEL SELECTION

FOR

REACHING OLDER PERSONS

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Prepared for presentation at the 28th Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society, Louisville, Kentucky, October 1975.

ABSTRACT

A number of general considerations in communication channel selection are noted, and the literature of channel use among older persons is reviewed. Selected approaches to communicating with older persons are described briefly.

While television is the dominant medium among older persons generally, print media play an important role also, especially among those with higher levels of education. On topics considered especially important, older persons appear to seek information across several channels of mass communication. Socialization into a "communication skills process" seems to affect channel use. Creation of new channels for communication with and among older persons has proved useful in some instances in the past, and holds promise for the future.

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COMMUNICATION CHANNEL SELECTION CONSIDERATIONS

FOR REACHING OLDER PERSONS

Communication is unequivocably important in day-to-day life. It is so much a part of life that it is too often taken for granted.

The elderly face many situations in which usual communication processes are interrupted or distorted, however. Realization of the necessity of communication for daily functioning and, ultimately, for survival then becomes abruptly and abundantly clear.

Older persons often seem to be pushed and shoved into relative isolation from the mainstream of society's communication flow. It is much like the story of the youngster who angrily shouted at her small friend, "Shut up!" His considered reply was, "How would you feel all shut up?"

Isolation from communication flows sometimes accompanies physical isolation. Among the elderly institutionalization in hospitals or nursing homes, or confinement to one's living quarters as a result of physical disability, are examples of physical isolation which commonly cut communication channels.

Those who have been working most of their lives and then are forced to retire are among the most likely to suddenly feel "all shut up." Habitual channels of interpersonal communication are cut, and some of the mass media messages which are beamed at these persons suddenly hold little meaning.

uals and groups in the particular social setting? (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1972; Marceau, 1972; Rao, 1966)

*What use is the audience accustomed to make of the different channels? Do use habits correspond to the things the different channels are thought to do best? If not, can channel use be changed, or can the use made of channels be altered? How can several channels be combined so they will reinforce each other? What channel selection patterns will be most likely to trigger small-group communication? (Schramm, 1965)

*How much will different patterns cost? Is it possible to present messages at no dollar cost, for example through creation of media events, through participation in discussion programs, through use of the new community channels on cable TV? What is the relative cost-effectiveness in terms of desired behaviors on the part of target audiences? What hidden costs (staff and volunteer time, materials, transportation, etc.) must be considered in evaluating channel selection strategies?

Of the many concepts which aid in analyzing these questions five have been chosen for discussion here. They are control, space-time organization, participation, speed, and permanence.

(1) Control. Control of communication is ubiquitous. Whatever the channel involved, a variety of control processes enter into determination of the nature and form of messages which flow through it. Central to the present purpose is the

concept of locus of control: Is control over the channel held by the organization which is preparing the messages for transmission to the elderly? Or is it held by organizations whose primary interests are elsewhere than in service to older persons? (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1973)

(2) Space-Time Organization. Printed materials and still pictures are space-organized. Radio broadcasts and telephone conversations are time-organized. Face to face communication, sound films, and television are time-and-space organized. (Innis, 1951, 1972; Schramm, 1965)

(3) Participation. Channels may be characterized as to whether they permit much or little participation on the part of an audience. (Allport & Cantril, 1935; Schramm, 1965) Thus, a media scale might be created, running roughly from most to least participation. It would be headed by personal conversation. The telephone also permits a good deal of participation, while formal meetings allow somewhat less. Moving to the mass media, motion pictures, television, and radio allow more participation than do newspapers or magazines; books allow the least.

(4) Speed. "Timeliness in maximum in television and radio. There is considerable serse of timeliness in newspapers; some in magazines; less in motion pictures; least in books." (Schramm, 1965)

(5) Permanence. "Books probably give the greatest sense of permanence. Next come motion pictures and magazines. There is a small amount of permanence in newspapers. Least

permanent are radio and television," (Schramm, 1965)

If the locus of control of a communication channel is within the organization which is producing the messages to flow over the channel, messages may more faithfully reflect the purposes of the organization. The context within which the messages are presented may also be determined to a greater extent than under situations of external channel control, which may affect message interpretation. Internal channel control may be more costly for a given audience size, however, if the audience is diverse and scattered.

According to Schramm (1965), "The space-organized media appear to offer more favorable conditions for difficult concepts, for masses of detail, for criticalness, discrimination, and selectivity on the part of the audience. On the other hand, the time-organized media appear to offer some advantages for rote learning of simple material ... and for encouraging suggestibility in an audience."

Schramm (1965) continued, "Higher degrees of social participation tend to create a sense of involvement, a group bond, a circular pattern of influence and decision making. They provide maximum feedback." High-participation media seem especially appropriate "for the process of exchanging and sharpening opinion. Low-participation media would seem to commend themselves for swift and widespread communication of information.

Media which embody the greatest speed lend themselves to the news function, while slower media lend themselves to study and reflective purposes. (Schramm, 1965)

Permanent media may be returned to again and again, to clarify difficult points or for later informational reference. "The more permanent media are likely to be used for principle and organized meaning, the less permanent for report or persuasion." (Schramm, 1965)

What Research Is Indicating

Older persons have only recently become a focal population for communication research efforts. The years immediately surrounding America's bicentennial celebration will prove to have been a turning point in attention and research devoted to this segment of society. (Comstock & Lindsey, 1975)

Although much of the research is yet to be done and many of the results yet to come, some patterns may be discerned in past and current studies. They can be helpful for selecting communication channels to reach older persons.

The foremost mass medium for older persons appears to be television. This is not a startling revelation since television is the foremost medium in the lives of most Americans. (Bower, 1973) But it has particularly important attributes for older persons.

Television watching is primary among leisure time activities, with some studies indicating that older persons spend

more time watching television than in any other single activity. (Riley & Foner, 1968*)

Viewing is comparatively high among those widowed and single older persons (particularly men) who live alone and who do own sets.

Individuals, according to their own reports, tend to shift toward more frequent television viewing as they reach the later stages of life cycle. Further, the majority of older persons, as of the population as a whole, express a positive attitude when asked how they feel about television generally.

Some research indicates that "television is a substitute for other media in very old age, due partly to a decline in communication capacities." (Chaffee & Wilson, 1975. See also Cassata, 1967; Graney, 1974; Graney & Graney, 1974.) Chaffee and Wilson speculate that the attraction of television is that it does not force the person to rely on only a single sense modality--sight for reading, or hearing in the case of radio. "Television, a two-sense medium, is the very old person's best bet." (Chaffee & Wilson, 1975)

One drawback about television for older persons is that set ownership (and the resultant opportunity to view regularly) tends to drop with increasing age beyond 65, among widowed and

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*This excellent summary was used extensively in preparation of the present paper. Unless otherwise indicated, statements summarizing research on media use among older persons were drawn from this volume. Individual studies will not be separately footnoted.

single older persons living alone, and in the lower income brackets.

This drop in ownership may reflect at least partly, however, a decreased attractiveness of television programming to older persons. Television's emphasis on youth, and its sometimes derogatory image of the elderly, may cut its support. (Schramm, 1969)

Reading appears to be one of four leisure activities (watching television, visiting, and napping or idleness are the others) which occupy a good deal of time among older persons.

Therefore, the print media, especially newspapers, cannot be discounted as important channels when trying to reach older persons. Obviously, the physical capability of sight is needed for these media (unless one person reads to another or print contents are transferred to aural media).

Also important in use of print channels is what Kent and Rush (1975) call a "communication skills process." A study they conducted among older persons in Gainesville, Florida, suggests there is an orientation among the more highly educated toward reading the printed page rather than attending to the broadcast media. There were indications that this orientation results, in part at least, from socialization into print media use as part of early educational experiences.

Much the same conclusion was reached by Schramm (1969) from a comparison of knowledge levels of younger and older

persons with less than a high school education. At this educational level, older persons had less knowledge than younger, leading to the thought that lack of socialization into print media use may cause the less-educated to fall farther and farther behind in knowledge with age.

McLeod and O'Keefe (1972) point out, however, that there is considerable ambiguity as to the relationship between education and time spent with the media, and further study is called for.

Some studies indicate that reading, including that of magazines and books, tends to take an upturn at 60 after a decline from the teens. Although Chaffee and Wilson's (1975) data show a somewhat gradual increase in newspaper readership from age 18, they also point to the 66-73 age segment as having quite a dramatic upsurge in print media use. They note that it is as if the person had "held off" until retirement to "catch up on reading." In their study, reading of all types drops off precipitously in the post-73 years. This contradicts sharply other research which indicates that reading is particularly high among those over 80 years of age.

Chaffee and Wilson (1975) guess that the reason behind the drop in reading is sense-related in that as persons get to be very old they become much more likely to have trouble hearing or seeing. They note that, in their study, time spent with television increases somewhat among the very old, "who had apparently temporarily slacked off in TV use in favor of

reading immediately after retirement."

Radio as a channel for reaching older persons seems, at least in the eyes (ears) of the authors, not as important as television and newspapers. It involves only one sense modality, which places obvious restrictions on its use for persons who are hard of hearing. The usual music-news format (almost universal with strong emphasis on the former) may not be particularly appealing to older persons given the predominance of musical programming for younger tastes. The direction of programming toward younger persons is a problem with all the mass media, however.

Some research attention has been given radio as a source for fulfillment of background companionship functions. There are again conflicting research results concerning whether radio usage increases or decreases in later life (see Chaffee and Wilson, 1975).

Book readership will not be discussed in this report since the authors did not locate enough substantial evidence on the use of this single channel by older persons to offer any particular guidelines for channel selection.

Movies appear to be a channel which will not reach older persons with enough frequency to be generally useful. Movie attendance drops steadily from the teens onward.

Interpersonal communication as a channel seems to be most worth consideration if the communicator can in some way intervene in that narrow situational variable of visiting among

older persons, usually with friends and relatives within a restricted geographic area. Visiting is a frequent activity in the lives of many older persons, and as noted above seems to hold its own importance with television watching, reading, and napping or idleness.

There is an indication of some decrease in proportions of older persons visiting among the widowed or single who live alone.

Chaffee and Wilson (1975) found in their study a gradual, if not quite monotonic, increase throughout life in contacts with relatives and a correlative decline in communication with friends outside the person's local community. Membership in formal organizations, in that study, increases steadily throughout life--until the person in his or her 70's apparently breaks off many of these ties.

Kent and Rush's (1975) study seems to indicate that older persons active "in mind" as well as body attend meetings of voluntary organizations rather frequently. An obvious part of the communication skills process for the more highly educated, print-oriented older person is frequent attendance at meetings. The more educated older person also visited friends more often.

In summary, research seems to point to television, reading (especially newspapers), and visits with friends and relatives as primary channels of communication for older persons.

We would like to turn briefly to another channel consideration--that of content or the messages which are carried on these channels. There is substantial evidence that older persons pay close attention to serious subject matter. An interesting indication of such seriousness is the finding that persons beyond 60 are more likely than younger people to rate the newspaper as the most "entertaining" medium and as somewhat more important to them than television. Riley and Foner (1968) cite several studies which tend to establish this serious content selectivity by older persons.

Kent and Rush (1975) found that knowledge of a certain public affairs event (the Vietnam War resister amnesty program) is predicted by older persons' educational level, attention to the print media, and level of activity in interpersonal discussion situations (such as attending meetings and visiting friends).

Chaffee and Wisson (1975) asked their respondents (across age groups) to select the "most important" issue from a choice of four concerning environmental issues. It can be inferred that the selected issue concerns a "serious" topic. The respondents were then asked to report important sources of information on the selected issue, and which one was the most important influence on their opinions regarding the issue.

It became clear that media sources, especially television and newspapers, were more important influences than inter-

personal sources of direct experience with the environmental issue.

The authors point out:

> It is clear that the person's general inclination to spend time--even for general news purposes--with a one-modality medium drops off dramatically when extreme old age robs one of perceptual capacity. But where specific motivation to learn about a topic--because the person considers it an important matter to know about--is high, single-modality medium use remains at its previous level. This is evidence that motivations for using the media are rather powerful factors, capable of overcoming the imperatives of the life cycle in determining what uses the person will make of the rich assortment of mass media at different stages in life.

When a message is important to an older person, general channel selection considerations become of less significance. Information will be sought through various channels. The question then becomes what topics are important enough to create such message-seeking motivations.

We need to know more about what specialized information is already available for older persons through the media. And then we need to determine if the specialized information is reaching its audience and serving its intended purpose. Do we need more specialized information?

Do we need specialized channels of communication for older persons?*

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*Kent and Rush (1975) found that nearly two of three older persons questioned in their Gainesville study would be interested in reading a newspaper printed especially for older persons.

Some Approaches to Communicating with Older Persons

Many individuals, agencies, and groups are not waiting for the results of research concerning the communication needs and behavior of older persons. Even if they are interested, urgent problems make it imperative that they act now to reach an older audience. Some seem to be doing quite well.

New York Times television critic Les Brown (1975) points to an experiment in the delivery of health information by television in New York City. Channel R is a private cable-TV station serving the 330 residents of the Gaylord White public housing project, a 20-story apartment building for senior citizens in East Harlem. The median age of its tenants is 76. Many subsist entirely on Social Security payments.

The television project began in June, 1974, utilizing "the medium that occupies most of their time," Brown reports. It was intended, too, to counter the sense of isolation felt by many of the aged when they are uprooted from their families. But the real lure of the station is health, according to the registered nurse specializing in health education who directs the station from the basement of the housing project.

The project was devised and is supervised by the communications division of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, operating under the department of community medicine. It was established on funding from the Lister Hill National Center for Biomedical Communications of the National Library of Medicine.

The station offers a one-hour program three days a week at 9:30 a.m. Each program is repeated at noon and again at 4:30 p.m. The typical mix in the magazine-like format includes news of the community and the building, weather reports, activities announcements, shopping hints, readings, personality features, and about 10 minutes on home safety and health-care advice.

Once a week portions of a coffee session with a guest speaker--usually from Mount Sinai--are taped for the broadcasts.

According to the station's director, "We have opened the minds of this audience to where they care more about themselves medically and socially than they had before. They're interested now in what we can contribute to their physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being, which commercial television doesn't do for them."

In Gainesville, Florida, senior citizens have their own senior citizen disc jockey, Eloise Cozens Henderson, who talks to beautiful people over 50. University of Florida student journalist Kenneth Goodman (1975) reports that Henderson plays music, mostly sacred, and talks about everything from peach tree switches to medical prescriptions for 45 minutes beginning at 9 a.m. Sundays on WDVH, a commercial radio station.

She describes her air time as "visiting." "I try to let them understand and feel that because you reach a certain age, you don't have to go into seclusion. One lonely lady once

called in to say, 'I listen to you and I feel somebody has come to see me. I've had a caller.'"

Although she has had university students call in insisting, "I listen, too," the bulk of Henderson's audience is composed of older persons. Approaching 70 when the news story was written, Henderson also serves as the station's women's program director.

Alachua County in Florida and the state's Division of Aging sponsor a toll-free telephone number to inform more poor people, especially older persons, about helping agencies. Gainesville Sun staff writer Cissy Steinfort Ross (1975) reports that Alachua County Information and Referral Service (I & R), which has been operating since 1972 with a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week service, was selected as a base to expand telephone service regionally to an additional nine surrounding rural counties in Florida. All 10 counties are listed as having per capita incomes below the state poverty level.

The toll-free number passes on information about food stamps, transportation, medical services, housing, and many other subjects.

The new regional I & R program staff had to use their ingenuity to contact those already providing services in outlying counties. Division of Family Services staff (who are often the only government agency delivering social services in the sparsely populated agricultural counties), ministers,

bookmobile librarians, and doctors running rural clinics were all questioned about what they offer.

Introducing I & R to people already established in the rural counties will spur its acceptibility by "the residents, especially the elderly, who will only relate to people they know personally," the I & R supervisor was quoted as saying.

Older persons are increasing their interpersonal communication in at least one powerful form--a movement toward organization. New York Times writer Nancy Hicks (1975) reports the movement began with the push for Medicare in the 1960's and has grown in earnest over the last four years.

It has different groups and different philosophies, Hicks writes, but the National Association of Retired Persons (7.7 million members), the National Council of Senior Citizens (3 million members), the Gray Panthers, and others have put together increasingly sophisticated lobbies.

All have experienced legislative staffs well-versed in such programs as Social Security, Medicare, subsidized housing and food stamps--programs on which the elderly depend.

In an article called, "Is Retirement Fatal?" (Kelly, 1975) psychiatrist Robert Butler (author of Why Survive? Being Old in America) is quoted as saying he thinks preparation for retirement should begin as early as grade school. "Children should be taught that old age is not something to dread but a very special time of life. And as part of this training, we

should show them how to use their time more creatively ... ."

We would refer back to points made earlier in this paper about socialization in terms of a "communication skills process." There is obviously a need for more research along these lines to better understand what roles and functions mass and interpersonal communication play in the socialization process.

Equally important, we should direct more of our efforts toward innovative, experimental approaches which not only utilize communication skills in attempts to reach older persons, but which also involve older persons in utilization of communication skills both to reach more deeply into themselves and to reach out and touch others. In this way, selection of communication channels will utilize the general capability of the channels as well as their specialized potential, largely underutilized today.

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